

## **Vashti McCollum: The “Atheist” Mom**

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She had tomatoes and cabbages thrown at her, her family’s kitten was stolen, and she was shunned by an entire community, yet she changed Illinois education forever. In 1945, Vashti McCollum filed a lawsuit to abolish religious instruction in public schools. Losing in two lower courts, she proceeded to take her case to the national level and won. McCollum’s quest to honor religious freedom significantly changed Illinois education, leading the way for many more cases involving the separation of church and state and proving that she would go as far as needed to stand up for what she believed.

When McCollum’s son Jim came home with a permission slip for participation in religious instruction at South Side, a public school in Champaign, Illinois, Vashti initially refused to sign it. She did months later when she saw how badly Jim wanted to take the class. Soon after signing the form, however, McCollum realized that the class did not teach students ethics, morals, tolerance, or good behavior as she had expected. Instead, she said, it promoted “complete religious indoctrination, abounding in faith and miracles.” The next year, Jim transferred to Dr. Howard, another public school in Champaign. Again, he brought home a permission slip for religious instruction which she refused to sign. McCollum believed that these religious classes were violating the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution dealing with the separation of church and state. She also thought that it was inappropriate for churches to take advantage of public schools. As a result, the McCollum family was ostracized and bullied by the community. The school forced Jim to sit alone in the music room or in the

hallway while other students were in religious classes, and he was subsequently teased by his peers. He often came home crying because teachers seemed angry at him for not participating in religious instruction. They told him that his parents should sign the permission slip because he was keeping the class from being “100 percent,” and they often tried to convince McCollum to allow Jim to take one of the classes, but with no luck.

Public reaction to the case varied. Some people were very much on Vashti’s side. Support came from many places, including a Unitarian minister, Phil Schug, who helped McCollum throughout the entire process. One Jewish family, who had gone through the same thing as Vashti and her family, went to all of McCollum’s hearings. The McCollums also received many calls and letters from people with support and wishes of good luck, but very few revealed their names.

Others vehemently opposed Vashti’s position. One unnamed group planned to murder her. In addition, the McCollums received many threatening phone calls and letters containing unimaginably foul language. One man even went to the Illinois Board of Education to legalize religious classes in schools before McCollum could make them illegal. This bill, however, never passed. At Halloween, a group of people threw various fruits and vegetables at Vashti, piled trash and leaves two feet high against the front door of her house, and stole the family kitten.

Controversy surrounded the McCollum case. Many believed that she was an atheist trying to attack religion, but as she states in *One Woman’s Fight*, “nothing could have been farther from the truth.” Having been raised by a religious mother who

baptized and named her for a biblical feminist, McCollum was not opposed to religion. Her objective, she said, was to defend the constitutional right to religious freedom.

The case first went to trial in Champaign, and people of many different religions testified. Vashti, Jim, and Vashti's father, a self-proclaimed atheist, also testified. After many long weeks, the court found that the students who did not participate in the religious classes were treated fairly by being able to attend study hall while the classes were going on, and that the religious classes were extra-curricular activities, not academic classes. The court also decided that any ostracizing of Jim by his peers was not because of his failure to attend the religious classes, but because of behavioral problems having nothing to do with Jim's religious beliefs. The McCollums had lost. The case was then heard in the Illinois Supreme Court with similar results. Finally, the case went to the United States Supreme Court. In an 8 to 1 vote, the justices agreed with McCollum. They ruled that the classes had no real purpose in the school other than to aid religion. They found these classes in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution, and religious classes in public schools became illegal.

Vashti McCollum changed the Illinois school system forever and led the way for similar cases to be brought to the nation's attention. Since the McCollum case, many more suits regarding religion in public school have been filed. One was Engal v. Vitale in 1962, which dealt with a New York school requiring daily mandatory prayer. Another was Herdahl v. Pontotoc [Mississippi] County School District in 1995, filed fifty years after the McCollum, challenging intercom prayers and Bible instruction in public schools.

[From Elizabeth A. Henke, "Engal vs Vitale." Encyclopedia of American History: Postwar United States 1946 to 1968; Dannel McCollum, "Local Lawsuit Establishes

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